

## Delinquent Dogs and the Molise Malaise: Negotiating Suburbia in John Fante's "My Dog Stupid".

RUTH HAWTHORN

Abstract: This article explores ideas of suburban masculinity in "My Dog Stupid" (1986), a comic novella by the critically neglected novelist and screenwriter John Fante. Placing the text within the context of the twentieth-century suburban "canon", I argue that Fante complicates and critiques the dystopian image of American suburbia that has dominated both fictional and sociological representations of this environment over the past seventy years.

Traditionally, the work of the novelist and screenwriter John Fante has been read as an examination of a hyphenated-American's struggle to make peace with both American culture and his Italian heritage. He grew up in Colorado during a period of nativist backlash against the mass immigration of the early twentieth century, culminating in the election of a Klan member as mayor of Denver in 1923. In most regions, the Ku Klux Klan's hostilities were largely directed at black and Jewish populations. In Colorado, however, these minority groups were small and concentrated, in comparison to the state's vastly diffuse Italian-American populace, and consequently the Klan's "100 percent Americanism!" agenda had a distinctly anti-Catholic bent; the school Fante attended was subjected to the Klan's burning cross during his time there.<sup>1</sup> As Fante's biographer Stephen Cooper points out: the atmosphere in Colorado was 'thick enough with suspicions of Romanist atrocities, immigrant intrigue, and Italian outlawry to make a first-generation Italian-American boy acutely aware that he was an object of fear and hatred in the eyes of a significant segment of his hometown's population.'<sup>2</sup> This acute awareness of the ways in which a dominant "American" identity is established through a process of aggressive exclusion permeates Fante's work. The sense of being an "un-American" outsider is a recurring preoccupation for his alter-ego protagonists from the youthful Jimmy Toscana of his short stories, who dislikes bringing friends home because 'the place looks so Italian', and the abrasive Arturo Bandini who is acutely aware of his precarious position above Mexicans, Jews and "Japs" in the social strata of depression era Los Angeles, to the more prosperous Henry Molise of his later works who is still regarded with fear by his

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Cooper, *Full of Life: A Biography of John Fante*, (Edinburgh: Rebel Inc, 2000), 24

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 26

WASP mother-in-law who believes he might 'slash her with a knife, Italian-style.'<sup>3</sup> With this continued sense of a lack of acceptance, Fante's life and semi-autobiographical fiction both confirm and complicate Eric Avila's narrative of "white flight" from LA, where 'Europe's most denigrated ethnicities' left their distinct metropolitan neighbourhoods for 'the vanilla suburbs', claiming their place within 'Southern California's brand of whiteness'.<sup>4</sup>

However, although it is clearly an important theme in Fante's writing, ethnicity is a very limited lens through which to examine his diverse oeuvre and, at times such analysis has verged on reductive essentialism, obscuring and oversimplifying his complex and frequently ambivalent negotiation of many facets of American culture and mythology.<sup>5</sup> William Boelhower argues that 'ethnic literature should not be ghettoized by separating it either from so-called American mainstream literature or from national cultural issues in general [...] there could be no such thing as ethnic literature outside of the structuring context (American political and cultural boundaries) in which it is created'.<sup>6</sup> The fiction of John Fante attests to this. His characters' cultural engagements and estrangements continually serve to undermine unitary or reductive definitions of national identity. Placing Fante's work into the category of Italian-American literature effectively separates it from many of the texts with which it has most in common. I posit Fante instead as a writer centrally concerned by ideas of place whose texts raise prominent questions about the myths, ideals, fantasies and delusions which shape lived experience in several distinctive American environments, from the Midwestern small town, to the multi-ethnic neighbourhood of LA's Bunker Hill and out to the Californian suburbs. All of his texts deal with the frequently troubling implications of an illusory idea of place supplanting the physical space itself. This is a particularly pertinent concern in the rise of the American suburbs which, as Dolores Hayden argues, is very much 'a landscape of the imagination', home to both the American Dream of self-fulfilment and the American

---

<sup>3</sup> John Fante, "Odyssey of a Wop" in *The Wine of Youth: Selected Stories* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow, 1985), 139; *The Brotherhood of the Grape* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 1997), 103

<sup>4</sup> Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 15-16. People of Southern Italian descent like Fante were ranked one above 'negroes' in a 1933 FHA 'assessment of racial worth' (35-36).

<sup>5</sup> See for example: Stephen Cooper and David Fine (eds.) *John Fante: A Critical Gathering*, (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1999); Kenneth Scrambray, *Queen Calafia's Paradise* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007); Catherine Kordich, *John Fante: His Novels and Novellas* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 2000), all of which focus heavily on ethnicity in Fante's work. Stephen Cooper's *Full of Life: A Biography of John Fante*, (Edinburgh: Rebel Inc, 2000) and Richard Collins' *John Fante: A Literary Portrait* (Toronto; Buffalo; Lancaster: Guernica, 2000) are much broader in their analyses, highlighting a wider set of literary, historical and autobiographical contexts pertinent to Fante's writing.

<sup>6</sup> William Boelhower, *Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 9-10

Nightmare of soulless consumerism.<sup>7</sup> This article will examine Fante's underappreciated novella "My Dog Stupid" (1986) in the context of sociological and literary representations of suburbia throughout the twentieth century, in order to show his astute critique of some of the ways in which this environment has been imagined.<sup>8</sup> Fante invokes both the utopian and dystopian visions commonly used to circumscribe suburbia only to reveal each as false and limiting, in a narrative which hinges not just on this environment's human dramas, but also, crucially, on the uneasy incorporation of animals, especially the novella's eponymous dog, into this apparently conservative domain.

### **Finding Significance in Suburbia**

For Noam Chomsky, the mass migration of the population to the suburbs throughout the twentieth century represents 'a massive social engineering project, which has changed US society enormously'.<sup>9</sup> This new environment, emergent in the 1920s and a significant element of the physical and cultural landscape by the 1950s, was initially envisioned in utopian terms as an emblem of national prosperity: 'the promised land of the American middle class.'<sup>10</sup> Property developers explicitly evoked Edenic or heavenly images of suburbia in their promotional materials and trade journals, marketing their homes as 'the working man's reward' and promising happiness as part of the bargain.<sup>11</sup> As Joan Didion observes, the suburban ideal is continuous with the frontier promise of starting afresh, which is such a prominent facet of American mythology: 'The frontier had been reinvented, and its shape was the subdivision, that new free land on which all settlers could recast their lives'.<sup>12</sup> Radiant portrayals of suburban life were disseminated by the television sitcoms of the 1950s and 1960s, such as *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver*, providing what Robert Beuka describes as 'the prevailing vision of suburbia': a harmonious, affluent, sentimentalized

---

<sup>7</sup> Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 3

<sup>8</sup> Although completed in the late sixties, Fante was unable to find a publisher for this novella. It was released by Black Sparrow Press with the short story "The Orgy" in *West of Rome* (1986)

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 5

<sup>10</sup> Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (New York; Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 5

<sup>11</sup> See Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 5-7. See also Kelvinator's advert "Home, Home at Last" in *American Home*, 33 (Dec 1944), 55, which promotes their suburban development through staunch nationalism: "This will be our part in the building of a greater, happier nation. For we believe all of us owe to those who have fought to preserve it, a strong, vital and growing America – where every man and every woman will have the freedom and opportunity to make their dreams come true".

<sup>12</sup> Joan Didion, "On the Mall" in *The White Album* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2009), 181

community of nuclear families.<sup>13</sup> Each week, the families in these series would undergo a minor disruption but learn a moral lesson by the end of the episode that re-affirmed “American” values. When the producer of *Father Knows Best*, Eugene B. Rodney was approached with the suggestion that his show was schmaltzy, he countered flamboyantly, ‘If I ever get a director so cynical that he can’t feel it deep in his heart when a little girl places a crippled sparrow in a nest and then goes upstairs to her room and prays to God that that sparrow lives – why, I’ll fire him!’<sup>14</sup>

However, alongside these popular images of loving, moralistic, all-American families and angelic children praying for crippled sparrows, there has developed an altogether darker and equally pervasive image of suburbia in the latter half of the twentieth century. In stark juxtaposition to the sitcom suburbs, post-1950s cultural, social, psychological and architectural scholars launched scathing attacks on the suburban environment. Critics of suburbia, like Jane Jacobs, William Whyte, Betty Friedan and Katherine and Richard Gordon wrote from a perspective of environmental determinism, which is to say they believed that ‘spatial form had a direct impact on social relations’.<sup>15</sup> As Becky Nicolaides points out, these social commentators believed that, far from suburban space enabling the nurturing communities of the sitcoms, the suburbs were a ‘site of social dysfunction and pathology’, detrimental to ‘the health of the American community’.<sup>16</sup> In Joan Didion’s article “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream”, the tawdry disappointments of the upwardly mobile suburban dream are even given as motivation for murder.<sup>17</sup> While they may have disagreed on the reasons – suburbia was damned both for fostering a sense of isolation and for creating an almost oppressive sense of community – they shared the view that ‘Hell [...] was moving from the city to the suburbs – like everyone else.’<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the most famous of these indictments comes in Lewis Mumford’s 1961 text, *The City in History*, where he writes:

In the mass movement into suburban areas a new kind of community was produced, [...]: a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads [...] inhabited by

---

<sup>13</sup> Beuka, 10

<sup>14</sup> ‘History’, *Father Knows Best* <<http://fatherknowsbest.us/History/>> [01.11.2014]

<sup>15</sup> Becky Nicolaides, “How Hell Moved from the City to the Suburbs: Urban Scholars and Changing Perceptions of Authentic Community” in Kevin Kruse and Thomas Sugrue (eds) *The New Suburban History* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 81

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 80

<sup>17</sup> Joan Didion, “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream” in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 3-28

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 80

people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold, manufactured in the central metropolis. Thus the ultimate effect of the suburban escape in our time is, ironically, a low-grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible.<sup>19</sup>

This dystopian vision of oppressive suburban sameness and mediocrity, at odds with the entitlement of American individualism is a familiar one, having thoroughly permeated the literature, film and television of the twentieth and twenty-first century. As for this environment's inhabitants, the composite figure of the male suburbanite from Katherine and Richard Gordon's colourful, pseudo-scientific study, *The Split-Level Trap* (1961), offers a blueprint for the disaffected Babbitts and Rabbits who populate twentieth-century American fiction:

[H]e represents the great sad joke of our time. Having amassed a wealth that used to be the subject of fairy tales, he often finds that he isn't happy after all. Somewhere, something is missing. He has created an opportunity for a richly rewarding life, but somehow finds it hard to take advantage of the opportunity. He is torn by anxieties and tensions, hounded by ulcers, menaced by heart disease. He gropes for tranquility and finds it only fleetingly in pill bottles and a cocktail glass.<sup>20</sup>

While on one level these studies offer some welcome critique of the rampant acquisitiveness of consumer culture, which found its natural habitat in the world of suburban home ownership, they do not provide a complete picture. Moreover, their focus on the "plight" of the spiritually impoverished but materially comfortable white middle classes is ethically problematic, given the legally endorsed social inequality facilitated by suburban zoning laws which enforced the exclusivity of home-owning privilege along class and racial lines.<sup>21</sup>

Recent scholarship has shown that these mid-century critiques, which emphasise the homogeneity of the suburbs – both architecturally and demographically – have served to propound a very limited view of the rise of suburbia, verging on cliché. As Kevin Kruse and Thomas Sugrue observe, 'many early suburban historians chose to study only those suburbs which fit the stereotype and, in so doing, reified it.'<sup>22</sup> The neighbourhood of relatively affluent androids which Mumford invokes, for instance, is a generalised imagining of the bedroom or commuter suburb; it does not emerge from direct engagement with a particular community.

---

<sup>19</sup> Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, 1961), 486

<sup>20</sup> Katherine K. Gordon, Richard E. Gordon, and Max Gunther, *The Split-Level Trap* (New York: Random House, 1961), 28

<sup>21</sup> See David M.P. Freund "Marketing the Free Market: State Intervention and the Politics of Prosperity in Metropolitan America" and Gerald Frug, "The Legal Technology of Exclusion", in Kevin Kruse and Thomas Sugrue (eds) *The New Suburban History* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 11-32 and 205-220

<sup>22</sup> Kevin Kruse and Thomas Sugrue, "Introduction: The New Suburban History" in Kevin Kruse and Thomas Sugrue (eds) *The New Suburban History* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 3

While such mass-produced Levittown suburbs undoubtedly exist, Mumford's totalising vision of white middle-class suburbia ignores what Kruse and Sugrue identify as the 'army of pink and blue collar suburbanites whose working class world of modest houses, apartments, and trailer parks was central to suburbia, but nonetheless remained on the periphery of suburban historiography [and the] real presence of racial minorities in the suburban environment.'<sup>23</sup> Only relatively recently has scholarship begun to engage fully with the diversity of the suburbs both in terms of class and race; as Andrew Wiese suggests, 'historians have done a better job excluding African Americans from the suburbs than even white suburbanites'.<sup>24</sup>

Studies like Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen's *Picture Windows* (2000), which offers a cultural history of the suburbs through interviews with actual suburban residents on Long Island work to counter the intellectual snobbery that dismisses the suburbs as homogenous, culturally barren non-places, 'where no-one lives but everyone consumes', home to, in HL Mencken's memorable coinage, the *booboisie*.<sup>25</sup> Instead, the suburbs emerge as a site of: 'community activism and political battles, women changing their lives due to the liberation movement, struggles over integration in schools and housing, and even suburban race riots'.<sup>26</sup> Similarly interrogating the myth of suburban sameness, Becky Nicolaides' *My Blue Heaven* offers an account of a specific working class suburb (South Gate in Los Angeles) in order to examine the ways in which white residents, 'in their quest for the postwar suburban dream [defended] their standard of living against outside threats – the most ominous and dramatic of these being the civil rights movement.'<sup>27</sup> Nicolaides offers a complex social history of the conservative ideology of self-help underlying the racially exclusionary zoning, community policing and educational segregation policies which were used to aggressively defend white suburban privilege.

Although these more recent studies show American suburbia to be a diverse and complex site deserving of much more than dismissive condescension, such subtleties have not often made their way into fictional portrayals of this environment, where Mumford's vision of soulless suburban sprawl predominates and the white middle-class protagonists are figures straight out of the Gordons' *Split Level-Trap*, bemoaning their suburban fate. In fact, Beuka's

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 5

<sup>25</sup> Joan Didion, "On the Mall" in *The White Album* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 180

<sup>26</sup> Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xvii

<sup>27</sup> Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 2

*SuburbiaNation* (2004) and Catherine Jurca's ironically titled *White Diaspora* (2001) both conclude that representations of suburbia in twentieth-century American fiction and film have been almost universally negative.<sup>28</sup> In a vast body of texts, including but by no means limited to Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt* (1923), James Cain's *Mildred Pierce* (1941), John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy, (particularly *Rabbit Redux* (1971)), Raymond Carver's short stories, Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm* (1994) and AM Homes' *Music for a Torching* (1999), suburbia has been portrayed as exclusionary, repressive, grossly materialistic and alienating, inhabited by middlebrow snobs, dissatisfied romantics, paranoid voyeurs and even filicidal mothers. The suburban environment is held responsible for, in Beuka's terms, 'a proliferating sense of placelessness'.<sup>29</sup> Jurca's view of these texts, which focus on the imaginative homelessness and compromised masculinity of their suburban protagonists, is considerably more caustic. She argues that these novels, written for the most part by and about middle-class, white men (not a demographic renowned for its manifold social disadvantages) promote 'a fantasy of victimization'.<sup>30</sup> Her thesis is intended to expose 'the cognitive and rhetorical chicanery by which the privileged come to be seen and to see themselves as the disadvantaged and dispossessed'.<sup>31</sup> Central to both studies is the notion that the lack of 'established cultural meanings' in this fundamentally prefabricated space has left it rhetorically exposed.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, the significance of the suburbs has been largely determined through the abundance of contradictory fictional representations in the literature, film and television of the mid- to late-twentieth century.<sup>33</sup>

Though mentioned by neither critic, John Fante's work makes a provocative contribution to this body of texts. His early suburban novel, the gently comic, *Full of Life* (1952) chimed so well with cold-war family values that it was turned into a successful film starring Judy Holliday and Richard Conte as the quirky couple expecting their first child and endeavouring to manage the spiralling costs of home improvements in suburban Los Angeles. In a publicity campaign which underlined the links between the suburban ideal and consumer

---

<sup>28</sup> Jo Gill's study of suburban poetry *The Poetics of the American Suburbs* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), similarly acknowledges that "'suburban' is taken to signify a mundane mediocrity that barely merits serious consideration' and 'trace[s] the effects of this persistent disparagement on the emergence of a characteristically self-conscious, even self-doubting suburban poetic voice', 2.

<sup>29</sup> Beuka, *SuburbiaNation*..., 2.

<sup>30</sup> Jurca, *White Diaspora*..., 8.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 8-9.

<sup>32</sup> Beuka, *SuburbiaNation*..., 228.

<sup>33</sup> Rupa Huq argues, in a similar vein: 'In the absence of any definite definition of what we mean by suburbia, the concept has frequently formed in the popular imagination through representations of it in popular culture.' *Making Sense of Suburbia through Popular Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1.

culture, the film was promoted in conjunction with Macy's. Adverts for items including luxury prams, pickled gherkins (for pregnancy cravings) and celebratory cigars accompanied Macy's assurance that "You'll like *Full of Life*".<sup>34</sup> In stark contrast, the posthumously published novella "My Dog Stupid" is a more erratic work which both exemplifies and self-consciously undermines many of the traits of suburban literature Beuka and Jurca describe. The often darkly farcical narrative focuses on the disillusioned screenwriter Henry J. Molise and his struggle to make sense of life, as his counter-cultural offspring fly their comfortable nest in the evocatively named Point Dume (pronounced "Doom"), an upper-middle class Los Angeles suburb. Fante situates what Richard Collins has aptly termed the 'Molise malaise' against the turbulent backdrop of the 1960s, a decade in which America witnessed the emergence of a rebellious youth culture and radical civil rights movements, violent race riots and the government's controversial commitment to war in Vietnam.<sup>35</sup> Fante's incorporation of this social context distinguishes the novella from the suburban fiction of so-called 'happy problems' which Richard Ohmann suggests dominated the literary market at that time.<sup>36</sup> Fante, particularly in the early stages of his career, was a staunch acolyte of Mencken and an admirer of Sinclair Lewis; his first novel, *The Road to Los Angeles* (published posthumously in 1985 but written in 1936), sees his protagonist railing against his family in a stream of undigested Menckenisms: "Don't blame the pictures. You're a Christian, and Epworth Leaguer, a Bible-Belter. You're frustrated by your brumagen Christianity. You're at heart a scoundrel and a jackass, a bounder and an ass."<sup>37</sup> In his later novella, however, Fante diverges significantly from the simultaneously contemptuous and self-absorbed vein of suburban writing, moving towards a more subtle understanding of family and environment. This article posits "My Dog Stupid" as a text which both highlights and criticizes the restrictive conformity of suburbia while drawing attention to and satirising the indulgent self-pity inherent to this process.

### **The 'Molise Malaise'**

The novella introduces the suburb of Point Dume as 'a community without streetlights, a chaotic suburban sprawl so intricately bisected by winding streets and dead end roads that

---

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Stephen Cooper, *Full of Life: A Biography of John Fante* (Edinburgh: Rebel Inc, 2000), 255.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Collins, *John Fante: A Literary Portrait* (Toronto; Buffalo; Lancaster: Guernica, 2000), 189.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Ohmann, "The Shaping of the American Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960-1975", *Critical Inquiry*, 10.1 (1983), 210.

<sup>37</sup> John Fante, *The Road to Los Angeles* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 19.



after twenty years of living out there [Henry] still got lost in fog or rain, often wandering aimlessly over streets not two blocks from [his] house.’<sup>38</sup> His sense of dislocation from the interchangeable streets that make up his neighbourhood is established when driving through a raging storm, after an absurd and unsuccessful meeting with a director, he literally cannot find his way home:

as I knew I must...I turned off Bonsall instead of Fernhill and began the hopeless business of trying to find my house, knowing that eventually, provided I didn’t run out of gas, I would circle back to the Coast Highway and the bleak light of the telephone booth at the bus stop, where I could phone Harriet to come and show me the way home.<sup>39</sup>

Kenneth Scambray describes this disorientation as ‘emblematic of Henry’s conflicted ethnic condition’, but it is more convincingly viewed as exemplary of the “suburban condition” of geographical alienation.<sup>40</sup> Implicit in this passage is the sense of world-weariness and constrictive domestic obligation, central to many portrayals of suburban masculinity. John Cheever’s Francis Weed, for example, ‘come[s] home every night to a battlefield’ and is haunted by an intolerable ‘feeling of bleakness’,<sup>41</sup> while Updike’s Rabbit likens his existence to ‘lying down to die’.<sup>42</sup> Raymond Carver’s stories of working class suburbia, contain equally beleaguered men who refer to their suburban homes as ‘this tragedy’, who feel they are ‘drifting [...] losing control over everything’ and who want to ““Go someplace else””.<sup>43</sup> Exhibiting a similar sense of discontent and disconnect, Henry embarks on the ‘hopeless business’ of his homeward journey because he ‘must’. Referring to it as both ‘house’ and ‘home’ indicates his ambivalence toward the living space he shares with his family.

This distinction between the physical “house” and the sacred “home” is a prominent concern in suburban fiction, as material comfort is seen to limit the spiritual life to which the protagonists feel entitled. In Sinclair Lewis’ *Babbitt*, ‘there was but one thing wrong with the Babbitt house. It was not a home’.<sup>44</sup> In a similar vein, the Wheelers of Richard Yates’ *Revolutionary Road* (1961), despite initially joking that the ubiquitous picture window will not ‘necessarily destroy [their] personalities’, come to feel alienated from their home and

---

<sup>38</sup> John Fante, “My Dog Stupid” in *West of Rome* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1986), 9

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>40</sup> Kenneth Scambray, *Queen Calafia’s Paradise: California and the Italian American Novel* (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), 171

<sup>41</sup> John Cheever, “The Country Husband” in *The Stories of John Cheever* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1978), 328, 344.

<sup>42</sup> John Updike, *Rabbit Redux* (London: Lowe and Brydon, 1972), 103.

<sup>43</sup> Raymond Carver, “Viewfinder” in *What we Talk about when we Talk about Love* (London: Vintage, 2003), 11; “Jerry and Molly and Sam” and “The Ducks” in *Will You Be Quiet Please* (London: Harvill, 1995), 112, 132

<sup>44</sup> Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (London: Penguin, 1985), 18

oppressed by their possessions: ‘the wall of books [...] might as well have been a lending library. The other pieces of furniture had indeed removed the suggestion of primness, but they had failed to replace it with any other quality. Chairs, coffee table, floor lamp and desk, they stood like items arbitrarily grouped for auction.’<sup>45</sup> These examples of disaffection are more extreme than Henry’s ambivalence; even here, he is still able to locate ‘home’ with Harriet and as the narrative continues the initial disconnect is undermined. However, with the weary opening of the novella, Fante is evoking what Jurca describes as the ‘sentimental dispossession’ which runs through suburban narratives: ‘the affective dislocation by which white, middle-class suburbanites begin to see themselves as spiritually and culturally impoverished by prosperity.’<sup>46</sup> Although the Molise house is paid for, it signifies for Henry the prostitution of his talent which the purchase entailed, because ‘it looked exactly like what it was not – the domicile of a successful writer.’<sup>47</sup> To an extent, then, he confirms Beuka’s and Jurca’s view of the typical male suburbanite found in post-war fiction and film as he is ‘characterized by ambivalence, restlessness and failure’,<sup>48</sup> ‘by alienation, anguish and self-pity.’<sup>49</sup>

This dissatisfaction is built on in his sarcastic depiction of an average day in ‘the romantic, exciting, creatively fulfilling life of a writer’:<sup>50</sup>

First, the grocery list. Varoom! and I roar down the coast highway in my Porsche, seven miles to the Mayfair Market. Scree! I brake to a stop in the parking lot and, leap from the car, give my scarf a couple of twirls and zap! I enter the automatic doors. Pow! The lettuce, potatoes, chard, carrots. Swoosh! The roast, chops, bacon, cheese! Wham! The cake, the cereal, the bread. Zonk! The detergent, the floor wax, the paper towels.<sup>51</sup>

The ease of purchase and, indeed, the anonymity of the experience, which the youthful Henry once longed for, marks the materially improved circumstances of Fante and his fictional alter-egos.<sup>52</sup> The supermarket trip is a far cry from the excruciating scenes in his earlier novel *Wait Until Spring Bandini* (1938), describing the ritual ‘mortification’ of acquiring the family’s provisions on credit under ‘the watchful eyes of Mr Craik’, the local grocer.<sup>53</sup> It also reflects

---

<sup>45</sup> Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 31-32.

<sup>46</sup> Jurca, *White Diaspora...*, 7.

<sup>47</sup> Fante, “My Dog Stupid”..., 11.

<sup>48</sup> Beuka, *SuburbiaNation...*, 112.

<sup>49</sup> Jurca, *White Diaspora...*, 161.

<sup>50</sup> Fante, “My Dog Stupid”..., 33.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>52</sup> In “My Dog Stupid”, Henry shares the same impoverished Midwestern background as his creator. He reminisces about ‘when [he] was a boy in Colorado’ and refers to ‘the poverty of [his] childhood, the desperation of [his] youth’ (Fante, 1986, 54, 43).

<sup>53</sup> John Fante, *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1983), 74.

the homogenisation of the American landscape through suburban development, as the role of local, privately-owned shops was usurped by ‘strip shopping centers, “big box” chain stores, and artificially festive malls’,<sup>54</sup> something the narrator of *Rabbit Redux* observes with more direct pessimism: ‘stores have been starved by the suburban shopping malls’.<sup>55</sup> Aside from the ostentatious reference to his status-symbol Porsche, which indicates the pleasure he takes in certain material luxuries his screenwriting affords him, Henry is not content. The incongruously hyperbolic excitement with which the routine shopping trip is described highlights his sense of ennui. Furthermore, it sets up the disparity between his ideal Adamic self, ‘the wild carefree author, filling his days with exquisite sensuality’, which he locates in Rome, and his life as husband and father of four ‘who wrote cop-out scenarios for fifteen hundred a week (when employed!)’<sup>56</sup>

Superficially, Henry conforms to the stereotype of a conservative suburban father, exemplifying ‘the materialistic and anesthetised sensibilities of the adult generation in suburbia’ which in the 1960s, Beuka argues, came under attack from the younger generation who ‘saw in their own landscape a symbol of their parents’ commitment to a suffocating, oppressive materialism.’<sup>57</sup> Fante’s novella consciously sets up this generation gap before attempting to bridge it through questioning the veracity of this very schism. Henry’s ‘sentimental dispossession’ is propounded by the rift he feels between himself and the various members of his family. He and his daughter Tina are ‘strangers’, he is ‘too weary to comprehend Dominic’, Jamie is ‘a mystery’ and, even after twenty-five years of marriage to Harriet, he asks himself: ‘Besides being my wife what did I really know about her...?’<sup>58</sup> He tries to account for their communication difficulties, unconvincingly, by blaming the dominance of Harriet’s genealogy:

How much of her, and how little of me, had been transferred to our un beholden children? Except for Tina they had inherited her eyes, her bone structure, her teeth [...] Why didn’t they talk with their hands, instead of leaving them hanging dead at their sides during conversation? Where was the Italian’s devotion to the father, the clannish love of hearth and home? [...] These weren’t my children. They were merely four seeds that got waylaid in some dark Fallopian tube.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press, 2001), x.

<sup>55</sup> Updike, *Rabbit Redux*..., 13.

<sup>56</sup> Fante, “My Dog Stupid”..., 34, 109.

<sup>57</sup> Beuka, *SuburbiaNation*..., 136-7.

<sup>58</sup> Fante, “My Dog Stupid”..., 82, 94, 109, 65.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 65-66.

While the passage does reflect the perceived lack of common ground between Henry and the rest of his family, his deferral to ethnic stereotypes as the reason for this is consciously ridiculous, verging on self-parody. His relationship with his own father was hardly exemplary of the unconditional devotion he now claims as his due: ‘He had bullied me for years and on Christmas Eve, hostile with wine, I had challenged him. We had fought it out in our front yard [...] rolling in the dirt, kicking and gouging and cursing until the neighbors separated us.’<sup>60</sup> Moreover, the novella repeatedly highlights significant similarities between Henry and his children. Even Denny, with whom he has the most hostile relationship, is described as ‘restlessly on the move, the boy who loved to run away’, clearly echoing his father’s own desire for flight.<sup>61</sup> Henry’s recurring fantasy is one of escape, to leave his family and start a new life in Rome, the “Eternal City” whose long cultural history provides a glamorous contrast to his jaded existence on the suburb of Point Dume: ‘Back to my origins, back to the cradle of civilization, back to the meaning of meaning.’<sup>62</sup>

Back in reality, Henry portrays himself as a curmudgeon, resentfully enumerating the financial cost of his various offspring. His eldest son, Dominic, is introduced as having totalled several of Henry’s sports cars and being ‘busted for smoking pot,’ costing his father fifteen hundred dollars in legal fees, while Tina’s ‘beach bum’, ex-marine fiancé Rick Colp owes him ‘Twenty bottles of scotch [...] over a thousand eggs and a hundred and fifty pounds of ham’.<sup>63</sup> He bemoans Dominic’s taste in music, which is exactly of the sort someone who claims allegiance to ideals of ‘race pride’<sup>64</sup> and describes a day spent on the golf course as ‘rewarding’<sup>65</sup> should find offensive. It includes Simon and Garfunkel who composed the soundtrack to the iconic film of suburban alienation and youth rebellion, *The Graduate* (1967); The Monkees who recorded Carole King’s “Pleasant Valley Sunday”, a sardonic take on suburban materialism and conformity; and Frank Zappa whose work comprises countless songs including “Hungry Freaks, Daddy” (1966), “Plastic People” (1967) and “Mom and Dad” (1968) which scathingly satirise the emptiness, homogeneity and, above all, acquisitiveness of postwar American culture.<sup>66</sup> More seriously indicative of ‘anesthetised

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 125.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 133.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 15, 23, 22-23.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 121.

<sup>66</sup> See respectively; Simon and Garfunkel, *The Graduate: Original Soundtrack*, Sony (Released: 31 January, 1994); The Monkees, *Pisces, Aquarius, Capricorn and Jones Ltd.*, Rhino/Wea (Released: 10 July 2007); The Mothers of Invention, *Freak Out*, Rykodisc (Released: 1 April 2002); The Mothers of Invention, *Absolutely*

sensibilities' is Henry's disapproval of Jamie's voluntary work with 'maimed children' and his response to Dominic's confession that he is married to Katy, who is black and pregnant with their mixed-race baby: 'he was thumbing his nose at the world, my world.'<sup>67</sup>

These instances, which ostensibly brand Henry as an upholder of traditional suburban values are countered, in part through the self-denigrating irony with which they often are described, but, more significantly, by the novella's prevailing and entirely contrary image of Henry as estranged from the very community whose principles he pays lip service to. Within the affluent suburb of Point Dume, despite his relative wealth and the fact he has lived there for over two decades, Henry Molise is a definite outsider. Outsiderhood is often a badge of honour for suburban protagonists, such as Updike's Rabbit and Lewis' Babbitt who actively pursue relationships intended to shock their suburban communities. Richard Yates satirizes this kind of cardboard bohemianism through the Wheelers in *Revolutionary Road*; like Henry, they fetishize Europe as the cultural antidote to their suburban tedium. The brutality of Yates' omniscient narrator, however, allows his central couple April and Frank, no self-awareness; their sense of superiority amidst 'these damn little suburban types' is scathingly held up for judgment in exchanges like the following:

"Oh, hell, I was a little wise guy with a big mouth. I was showing off a lot of erudition I didn't have. I was—" "You were not! How can you talk that way? Frank, has it gotten so bad that you've lost all your belief in yourself?"

Well, no; he had to admit it hadn't gotten quite that bad. Besides, he was afraid he could detect a note of honest doubt in her voice – a faint suggestion that it might be possible to persuade her he had been a little wise guy, after all – and this was distressing.<sup>68</sup>

Here, Frank's willing and immediate retreat from his honest admission that he was full of bluster, serves to bolster April's dwindling vision of him as 'exceptional', despite the fact he is in fact much more comfortable with his unremarkable suburban existence than he would ever be "finding himself" in Paris.<sup>69</sup> Such moments progress from being comic to becoming increasingly uncomfortable, with the couple's continued mutual dishonesty – always narrated at a remove – culminating in the tragedy of April's self-inflicted death. In "My Dog Stupid", on the other hand, similar instances of self-delusion are undercut by Henry's first person voice which is characterized by a wry, self-effacing wit, which works to undermine any sense of superiority to his environment.

---

*Free*, Rykodisc (Released: 1 April 2002); *The Mothers of Invention*, *We're Only in it for the Money*, Rykodisc (Released: 23 April 2002).

<sup>67</sup> Fante, "My Dog Stupid"..., 109, 95.

<sup>68</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road*..., 24, 131.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 131.

In Henry's case, the petty prejudices of his neighbours, which mark him as suburban pariah are humorously displaced onto the canine world. The gated neighbourhood beach is guarded by Rommel, a German shepherd with an 'uncanny instinct for screening out strangers and dropouts (and wagging his tail at anyone in uniform)'; Henry is maligned largely because of his partiality for anti-social dogs, whose physical dominance over the Point Dume canine empire provides an antidote to his sense of inadequacy, his feelings of 'failure and defeat'.<sup>70</sup> Dog ownership appears in the text as continuous with the homogeneous suburban landscape, with pedigree breeds providing a further symbol of wealth: 'one-acre tracts on either side of the road, a house on each tract, at least one dog and usually two at every house. Point Dume was dog country, a canine paradise of Dobermans, German shepherds, Labradors, boxers, weimaraners, Great Danes and dalmations'.<sup>71</sup> Pet ownership here is clearly an extension of the suburban nuclear family, and particularly with the breeds mentioned here, the Aryan suburban nuclear family. As Kari Weil argues, following Deleuze and Guattari, '[Pets are creatures] made by humans to confirm an image of ourselves that we want to see, but one that is restrictive and regressive. Pets make us seem human when that means fulfilling an identity forced on us by our parents, our schools, and our government'.<sup>72</sup> It is hardly surprising then, that Rommel's role should be to normalize society by barking at bums and pandering to authority figures. Point Dume's dogs are exactly in line with Deleuze and Guattari's sense of 'family pets [as] sentimental, Oedipal animals each with its own petty history', existing to extend and consolidate the ideal of the American family.<sup>73</sup> The point is hammered home when Henry is invited in as a potential contributor to the TV sitcom, *Lucky Pierre* (a series in the *Leave it to Beaver* vein of suburban comedy), about 'fourteen-year-old Melinda', her father, 'a Wall Street banker' and her 'overbearing, snobbish Mommy'.<sup>74</sup> The hero of the piece is Melinda's dog, the 'fucking little French poodle named Pierre', a revoltingly saccharine creature who saves the passengers on a 747 jet from hijackers (who were 'black enough to be Cubans').<sup>75</sup> Though having only moments before professed his eagerness for the commission – 'I would have gone down on Joe Crispi [the producer] in front of Century-

---

<sup>70</sup> Fante, "My Dog Stupid"..., 39, 42.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>72</sup> Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals: Why Study Animals Now?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 53.

<sup>73</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 240.

<sup>74</sup> Fante, "My Dog Stupid"..., 49.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 50.

Plaza if the price was right' – the enterprise is a bridge too far and Henry leaves the screening, knowing he 'was going to vomit or die'.<sup>76</sup>

The latest addition to the Molise brood, an Japanese Akita (and suspected half-breed) called Stupid ravages the sitcom-style world of cutesy canine family values, upsetting both the racial purity and sexual prudery of the community as he rampages through Point Dume, overpowering and mounting male dogs and humans alike: 'he tried to jump all males without exception. He loathed females and if they were in heat he tore into them unmercifully'.<sup>77</sup> This 'fag dog', much to Henry's delight, invokes the consternation of his conservative neighbours: 'Bull terriers, and now this. Can't you own a civilized dog [...] Look at that horrible beast! He doesn't belong in a nice neighborhood.'<sup>78</sup> The implication is, of course, that his owner does not belong in a 'nice neighborhood' either. Henry, who clearly identifies with Stupid's 'adjustment problems' agrees: 'He was a misfit and I was a misfit.'<sup>79</sup> Here, Fante neatly summarizes the brand of vicarious outsiderhood commonly found suburban texts, where protagonists assert their autonomy through a fleeting, willfully scandalous relationship, often with someone from a more genuinely marginalised demographic. The real estate broker Babbitt, for instance, shocks his suburban set by supporting striking workers and having an affair with the bohemian Tanis Judique, while Rabbit causes outrage in his suburban community through his affair with the teenage runaway, Jane, and by taking in Skeeter, a black Vietnam vet and drug dealer. As Jurca argues, these supposedly rebellious relationships 'must be understood as an effect of the suburbanite's burgeoning self-consciousness and self-pity and not as evidence of a budding liberal conscience'.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, despite helping Skeeter flee the police, Rabbit is dismissive of the civil rights movement and views his black lodger through a fundamentally racist lens: 'So he is evil [...] a pit of scummed stench impossible to see the bottom of.'<sup>81</sup> This aligns him with the community of conservative values which he only superficially pushes against, and to which he returns at the end of the novel.

Superficially, Henry's relationship with the much maligned Stupid serves a similar purpose.

The dark humour of Stupid's escapades with their canine parody of suburban mores, slips over into something much bleaker and more unsettling. Throughout the novella, Henry

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 44, 50.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 52, 43.

<sup>80</sup> Catherine Jurca, "Tales of the Suburb" in Daniel Rubey (ed), *Redefining Suburban Studies: Searching for New Paradigms* (New York: Hofstra University, 2009), 174.

<sup>81</sup> Updike, *Rabbit Redux* ..., 208.

mourns the loss of Rocco – the legendary, delinquent bull terrier with whom Stupid is repeatedly compared – and shortly before the text’s conclusion, he recalls ‘the day Rocco was murdered.’<sup>82</sup> It is a startling, moving and uncanny moment, disrupting an idyllic summer’s day on the gated beach. When they come across a whale ‘marooned in two feet of water, the blow-hole on his back emitting painful squeaks, his tail flapping feebly, his eyes exuding greasy tears’, Rocco – let loose by an amused Henry – instinctively attacks the creature.<sup>83</sup> The watching crowd, who seemed to be appreciating the spectacle of the beached whale, ‘gathered around it in a semi-circle’, are horrified by the dog’s joyous but ineffectual assaults: ‘The dog was making a mockery of the whole thing.’<sup>84</sup> A clamour for Rocco’s death ensues and the twee, bourgeois world of suburban dog ownership is shocked into a fatal violence that only Henry mourns: ‘A teen-age girl with a wrinkled nose looked at my beautiful, dead Rocco, and said “I’m glad”’.<sup>85</sup> Henry’s pleasure at the disruption his delinquent pets cause within the eagerly scandalised community of Point Dume is rewarded with dire consequences both here and when a lawyer who has been subject to Stupid’s advances turns up on his son Jamie’s drafting board and takes his revenge. Henry’s fairly juvenile attempts at upsetting the status quo through the agency of his dogs are ruthlessly quelled by the dominant culture. Fante therefore offers us a critique of the kind of vicarious outsiderhood common to male suburban protagonists, as Henry who is responsible for letting the dogs loose is left guilty but otherwise unscathed, while the dogs and others who are close to him suffer the more direct retribution. While still critical of the conservatism and prejudices of suburbia, Fante’s text is equally harsh on Henry’s destructive attempts to assert his autonomy, which have no effect on the society he resents, but damage those around him. Unlike Babbitt and Rabbit, however, Henry’s “return” to his family is more complex homecoming. It does not simply mark a return to passivity, as in *Rabbit Redux*, which sees Harry reconciled with his wife and concludes with the muted ‘He. She. Sleeps. OK?’<sup>86</sup> Neither is it a reassertion of entitled individualism like *Babbitt* which ends with Babbitt telling his son ‘I’ve never done a single thing I wanted to in my whole life! [...] I do get a kind of sneaking pleasure out of the fact you knew what you wanted to do and did it [...] Go ahead Old Man! The world is yours!’<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>82</sup> Fante, “My Dog Stupid”..., 127.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 127-128.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 129.

<sup>86</sup> Updike, *Rabbit Redux*..., 407



As we will see, Henry's unusual reconciliation maintains the tensions between self, family, pets and society which are established in the early sections of novella.

Despite his desire to assert agency through his dogs, Henry's ultimate lack of control over Stupid and Rocco reflects the helplessness he experiences, as his human offspring move out. The link between the two is made clear in a scene where Henry approvingly observes his son sleeping with Stupid: 'They were both asleep, each on his right side, Jamie's arm around the dog's neck, both snoring. I liked what I saw. I liked boys sleeping with dogs. It was as close to God as they ever got.'<sup>88</sup> Although there are many instances exemplifying Henry's dissatisfaction with his home, family, and community, "My Dog Stupid" does not completely succumb to the indulgently self-pitying vein of suburban fiction which Jurca describes. Henry's existential angst is set against the more tangible problems faced by his children, which reflect specific social crises of America in the 1960s. In response to brutal police aggression and the assassinations of several prominent advocates, the Civil Rights Movement became increasingly radicalized during this decade. This development was met with alarmist reports in the mainstream media which, Michael E. Staub argues, portrayed the Black Panther Party 'as a motley crew of unstable, paranoid black juvenile delinquents.'<sup>89</sup>

Through Henry and Harriet's intolerant reaction to Dominic's relationship with Katy, Fante alludes to this context of racial tensions. His treatment of it, however, distinguishes his novella from other suburban texts whose protagonists' identification with marginalized groups is an assertion of their own autonomy which they feel to be compromised by suburban life, rather than a genuine commitment to rights of the disenfranchised.<sup>90</sup> This kind of posture as we have seen is parodied through the portrayal of Henry's relationships with Stupid and Rocco. In "My Dog Stupid", just as in Fante's other works, racism is rarely allowed to go unchallenged.<sup>91</sup> Henry's rebuke of Dominic's lack of 'race pride' is articulately undercut by his son's sarcastic derision:

---

<sup>87</sup> Lewis, *Babbitt*..., 303-304.

<sup>88</sup> Fante, "My Dog Stupid"..., 33

<sup>89</sup> Michael E. Staub, "Black Panthers, New Journalism, and the Rewriting of the Sixties" in *Representations*, No. 57. (Winter, 1997), 57.

<sup>90</sup> See Jurca, *White Diaspora*..., 133-159.

<sup>91</sup> Racism is a prominent theme in Fante's work, where "Americanness" is portrayed as an exclusionary identity, asserted through the denigration of "other" ethnicities. This is particularly prominent in *Ask the Dust* (1939) which offers a vivid portrayal of the racism which is deeply entrenched within a vibrantly multicultural depression era Los Angeles.

“‘Race pride!’ Say that’s a hell of a phrase, Dad. I’ll bet you dreamed it up yourself. It’s uncanny. No wonder you’re such a great writer.’ He crossed to the desk and picked up a pencil and wrote on an envelope. “‘Race pride.’ I want to write that down so I won’t forget it’.”<sup>92</sup>

When they receive a ‘telephonic chiller’ from Katy informing them Dominic has been beaten-up, Harriet’s assumption that it was Black Panthers who attacked him for ‘fooling around with one of their women’, clearly influenced by the chauvinistic media coverage Staub describes, is met with justified hysteria from Katy, who ‘shrieked with laughter’.<sup>93</sup> Ridicule is not the only response the text offers to racist bigotry, though. For instance, Harriet’s accusatory invective, “‘Niggers’”, is shown to dehumanise her in Henry’s eyes: ‘She was Medusa [...] Frightful. The unknown. A stranger.’<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, Dominic’s crisis – the marriage he kept concealed due to his parents’ prejudice and his fight with Katy, who wants an abortion – moves Henry from his habitual self-pity to a more considered guilt over his complicity in his son’s predicament. When Dominic thanks him before returning to his wife, Henry reflects on the manifold social problems of the country in which he has raised his son: Thanks for forcing him into a world of war and hate and bigotry. Thanks for marching him off to schools that taught him cheating, lying, prejudice and cruelty. Thanks for saddling him with a god he never believed in, and the only true church, all others be damned.<sup>95</sup>

Specifically exemplifying the ‘war and hate and bigotry’ is the Vietnam conflict into which Jamie is conscripted but Denny escapes. The drafting system is portrayed as overtly unjust as Denny buys his way out with a crooked doctor while Jamie, who loses his student deferment by leaving college to volunteer at an under-funded children’s clinic, is conscripted. Henry’s malaise is once again put into perspective when he accompanies Jamie to his meeting with the drafting board:

Stepping into the Selective Service office was like stepping into a Dostoyevsky novel. A chill of bureaucracy went right into your bones and the machinery of government began devouring you at once. A dozen youths, mostly long-haired, stood before little windows along a partition, talking to clerks...The harsh light brought out their features, emphasizing every stubble and pimple on their chin.<sup>96</sup>

The passage registers a ‘chill’, a moral repulsion from the impersonal Dostoyevskian administration and the visible youth of those being recruited. Aside from the obvious risk of death and physical injury, the psychological damage of the conflict, which the ‘machinery of government’ is inflicting upon those young enough to still have pimples, has already been

---

<sup>92</sup> Fante, “My Dog Stupid”..., 17.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 85, 88, 89

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 86

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 100

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 115

alluded to. Henry mocks Rick for his inability to repel Stupid's affections despite his decoration for service in Vietnam. His derision is silenced, however by the 'chastening' realisation that the sergeant's restraint is due to the fear he might 'blow his stack and kill Stupid.'<sup>97</sup> The profound problems faced by his children and, by extension, the younger generation at large, continually serve to highlight the triviality of Henry's various disappointments.

### **Family Reunion**

Jurca points out that in most post-war suburban fiction 'Family life provides little or no compensation [...] for struggles outside of the home.'<sup>98</sup> This is not the case in Fante's text. For Henry, it emerges, family is the 'only reality', as he comes to recognise that blaming an unbreachable generational schism for his sense of estrangement is 'corny' and 'self-pitying'.<sup>99</sup> Regaining meaning in his own life becomes inseparable from the need to understand his children: 'To write one must love, and to love one must understand. I would never write again until I understood Jamie and Dominic and Denny and Tina'.<sup>100</sup> This commitment to family is illustrated in the novella's climax. Henry sells a number of his possessions, including his prized Porsche, with the intention of purchasing a ticket to Rome. Instead, he tracks down Stupid (who has run away) and uses the money to buy him back at an extortionate price from a cynical farmer, in order to keep his promise to Jamie that he would look after the dog. Richard Collins describes this as a supreme sacrifice: '[Henry] gives up his dream of escaping to Rome in order to embrace the life of a man devoted to his snotty children, his bitchy wife and his stupid dog.'<sup>101</sup> Aside from Collins' questionable summary of the Molise family, the implied martyrdom ignores the fact that Henry's fantasy has already been emptied of its appeal: 'The Romans made bad American coffee [...] I'd miss the World Series [...] The lowest form of life was the Italian writer [...] He despised Italian-Americans, putting them down as cowards who had fled the beautiful national poverty.'<sup>102</sup> His decision to stay is not merely from moral obligation but also from a recognition of his family as the centre of meaning, the only reality, as the novella's ending suggests:

---

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 77

<sup>98</sup> Jurca, *White Diaspora...*, 167.

<sup>99</sup> Fante, "My Dog Stupid"..., 34, 58.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>101</sup> Collins, *John Fante: A Literary Portrait...*, 252.

<sup>102</sup> Fante, "My Dog Stupid"..., 134.

My gaze dropped to the white roof of the Y-shaped house, past the organdie curtains of Tina's window to the branches of a big ponderosa that still held the remnants of a tree-house Dominic had built when he was a boy and then my eyes shifted to the rusted bumper of Denny's car protruding from the garage, and above that to the tattered net of Jamie's basketball hoop.

Suddenly I began to cry.<sup>103</sup>

This final panorama of the Molise home, shows it as a space of significance because of the lived experience it has hosted, evidence of which is physically manifest in the traces left by the four children. Even when empty except for Henry and Harriet, this actual place holds more relevance for Henry than his romantic ideal of Rome. This description of the Molise house attests to the fact that 'decades of residents' additions and personalizing alterations' to their suburban domiciles have brought about the "humanization" of [this] once-forbidding landscape'; something Beuka claims even very recent portrayals of suburbia, which continue to present it as a sanitised, physically homogenous terrain, fail to acknowledge.<sup>104</sup> Henry ultimately locates meaning in the suburban home and, by extension, the life which he shares with his family.

However, neither does Fante revert completely to the saccharine TV-sitcom suburb which he evokes to some extent in *Full of Life*. While "My Dog Stupid" does conclude with an affirmation of family, it is by no means the traditional nuclear kind. Along with Stupid, Henry brings home Mary, a pig who Stupid has claimed as his mother, during his absence on the farm:

She gave off comfortable bourgeois vibrations of stability and faith in the Holy Ghost. She was my mother all over again [...] Stupid dropped beside her and washed her face. I had never seen him so content. His hangups had vanished. There was a softness in his bearish face. The brooding melancholy was gone.<sup>105</sup>

The three generations of family with which the novella culminates are queered by this inter-species triangulation. The homecoming is displaced as it is Stupid who achieves domestic bliss, making peace with Mary's 'comfortable bourgeois vibrations of stability', while Henry and Harriet are left with their empty nest. Rather than abandoning Stupid, Henry extends his home to accommodate not only the subversive dog, but also the pig upon whom he has become emotionally dependent. While this household may still raise eyebrows in Point Dume, it is not formed with the explicit intention of doing so, but out of an ethical commitment to others (both Stupid and Jamie). The novella comes to terms with suburbia neither through a final, circular assertion of individualism nor by capitulation to conformity.

---

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>104</sup> Beuka, *SuburbiaNation...*, 235.

<sup>105</sup> Fante, "My Dog Stupid" ..., 142.

Rather, it shows the complexity of connections possible within an environment which is so frequently portrayed as insular and aggressively self-serving. “My Dog Stupid”, makes a complicating contribution to the suburban “canon”, as Fante brings to suburbia the ambivalences around family, fantasy and identification with place which have been prevailing preoccupations throughout his career.

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Ruth Hawthorn is a lecturer in American Literature at the University of Lincoln. She is currently writing a book on American detective fiction for the BAAS Paperbacks series with Edinburgh University Press, and co-editing a collection of essays on animals in detective fiction for Palgrave’s Animals and Literature series.